

Ed Biederman Fish Camp

HABS No. AK-40

Left bank of the Yukon approximately 0.5 miles

downriver from Klondike River, Eagle vicinity

Yukon-Charley Rivers National Preserve

Alaska

HABS  
AK,  
19-EGL.V,  
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WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA  
REDUCED COPIES OF MEASURED DRAWINGS

Historic American Buildings Survey  
National Park Service  
Department of the Interior  
Washington, DC 20013-7127

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## HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY

### ED BIEDERMAN FISH CAMP

HABS No. AK-40

Location: Left bank of Yukon River opposite and approximately 0.5 miles downriver from mouth of Kandik River, approximately halfway between Circle and Eagle in the Yukon-Charley Rivers National Preserve, Alaska.

USGS Charley River Quadrangle, UTM Coordinates:  
07.7250005.393025.

Present Owner: Not known, currently under dispute.

Present Use: Seasonal.

Significance: Max Adolphus "Ed" Biederman ran the mail by dogsled from Circle to Eagle for over twenty years. The buildings at this site, which date from about 1916, were used by Biederman as a fish camp in summer, where he boarded dogs and caught fish for dog food. In the winter he used the camp as an overnight stop on his mail route.

### PART I. HISTORICAL INFORMATION

#### A. Physical History:

1. Date of erection: 1916, according to Charlie Biederman, son of the original owner, who said that his sister Nellie was born there that year.
2. Builders: Frank and Al Fish and Pete Sommerville helped Ed Biederman construct the main cabin.
3. Original and subsequent owners: Ed Biederman owned the place until he died in 1945. His widow sold it to her son-in-law and daughter, George and Nellie Beck, who used it for trapping. Beck allegedly lost it in a card game in the mid-1950s.
4. Original plans and construction: The main cabin is a one-story log building, saddlenotched. It is divided into two rooms by a log wall, which is notched into the exterior log wall. The exterior logs, though, extend the full 31' length of the structure. The roof was originally sod.

5. Alterations and additions: The roof has been covered with corrugated tin. On the front is a wood frame and vertical pole arctic entry which probably used lumber from Fort Egbert in Eagle. The arctic entry was probably added after construction, but it is present in the 1926 Mertie photograph. Corrugated tin has been used to patch the entry, and the north window has been covered on the exterior.
6. Outbuildings:
  - a. Bunkhouse: Located directly south of main cabin, the bunkhouse was built in 1918. According to Charlie Biederman, the logs were taken from Tom King's roadhouse on the other side of the river. Ed Biederman used two dogs to haul the logs. The bunkhouse is a one-room log cabin. The roof extends 8'-3" in the front to create a porch, which was never enclosed.
  - b. Upriver cabin: Approximately  $\frac{1}{4}$  mile upriver stands another cabin. Although its roof has caved in, the building is similar to the bunkhouse, with the roof extending to form a porch. Here, the porch roof was supported by only two posts. This building was not visited by the author.
  - c. Cache: The cache is located southeast of the main cabin and does not show in the 1926 Mertie photograph. Raised on posts, the cache is wood frame covered with irregular-width planks laid diagonally, with gaps between.
  - d. Greenhouse: The greenhouse, located west of the main cabin, is wood frame with horizontal beaded siding, most probably reused from Fort Egbert. The greenhouse, which does not appear in the 1926 Mertie photograph, may have also been used as a tent frame.
  - e. Meat cellar: A meat cellar is carved into the side of a hill, about  $\frac{1}{4}$  mile southeast of the camp site.
  - f. Other: Various A-frame doghouses and wooden boats remain around the site. Remains of fishwheels and drying racks can also be found, but the plethora of artifacts that was present in 1976 has largely disappeared (Grauman, #77).

B. Historical Context:

Max Adolphus "Ed" Biederman was born September 19, 1861, in Bohemia. He immigrated to the U.S. when he was 13, and in 1899 headed for Nome, drawn by the gold rush. He found all the land staked and began working on the lower Yukon. In 1910, Biederman carried mail by dogsled for the Northern Commercial Co. around Rampart and Tanana. In the summer, steamboats carried the mail, but in the winter, dogs were the only effective means of transportation. In 1912 Biederman took the Circle to Eagle run. In 1925, after an accident on the trail, his feet froze and his toes had to be amputated. His son Horace continued the mail run that year, but Ed Biederman put phonograph springs in the toes of his shoes so they wouldn't flap, and he was soon back on the trail. For four years, Johnny Palm underbid him for the contract, but Ed Biederman got it back. From 1930-34, Pacific Airlines had the mail contract, on an experimental basis. In 1934-35, Horace Biederman hauled the mail, and from 1935-38 Charlie, his brother, had the contract. In 1938 the airplane took over mail delivery permanently (Biederman; Scott; Grauman, 161-164; Springer).

Those who ran the mail between Eagle and Circle did more than deliver mail between those two towns. They also established the winter trail and kept it open, providing a transportation route used by travelers between the towns as well as the miners and trappers who lived along the Yukon. In the 1920s, the Alaska Road Commission took an interest in the trail. In 1921, the Annual Report noted that it was 190 miles and stated: "This winter trail is to be reconnoitered during next season with the end in view of eliminating dangerous sections on the surface of the Yukon River" (Part II, 40). In 1925, the Report noted, "numerous cut-offs have reduced this trail to 160 miles" (Part II, 68). The trail was never more than a winter trail because most of it was on the river.

Ed Biederman made the round trip between Eagle and Circle thirteen times in a winter. The trip took six days with a one-day layover in Eagle and Circle and then a six-day return. The first night out of Eagle was spent at Frank "Heinie" Miller's wood camp at the Tatonduk River. The next night was spent at Nation Roadhouse, and the third at his fish camp near Charlie Creek. Here he would switch dog teams. The next stop was Woodchopper Roadhouse, then 26-Mile camp, and finally to Circle. Biederman even stocked the roadhouses and shelter cabins for his own use, as shown in this letter to Charlie Ott: "I wish you would send me by return boat the following articles as I need them at Woodchopper and 26-Mile. Will leave for downriver as soon as the boat gets back" (September 10, 1922). A dogsled built by Charlie Mayo of Rampart for Ed Biederman in 1934 is in the collection of the Eagle Historical Society. It generally carried over 500 pounds of mail and was designed to be pulled by six to nine dogs. It cost \$50 (Biederman; Scott; Springer).

Dogs have to be fed, and for Ed Biederman that meant a summer of fishing. Biederman kept twenty-four dogs of his own, and often boarded and fed up to sixty. Because dogs were virtually useless in the summer, miners and trappers on the river boarded their dogs with Biederman. Biederman's fishing operation was impressive in its scale. He had two fishwheels, with 12' baskets that reached 8' into the water. They were pulled from the water by an enormous windlass built by Alfred Johnson. Biederman cleaned the fish in the river, then sent them to the drying racks on an overhead trolley. The drying racks were tiered, and could smoke 3600 fish at a time over three fires. On July 24, 1920, he wrote, "The fish [King Salmon] have been running heavy for six days but are slacking off now. I have got 900 up to date" (A. Biederman to C. Ott). A few years later he wrote:

The Dog Salmon being coming so fast I had to stop the wheel for two days. The last day's run she caught 900 in 12 hours. That was a little too much for me and Horace to handle... (A. Biederman to C. Ott, August 25, 1924).

Biederman sold the dried fish as far away as Eagle and Circle. He baled them in 65-pound bundles (C. Biederman; Scott; Knutson).

Biederman was assisted in this venture by his family. He married Bella Roderick in 1916 and they had five children. In the winters, they lived in Eagle, where the children attended school. They left for fish camp on the first of June and returned on the last boat before freeze-up at the end of September. When his sons took over the mail route, Biederman continued working for the N.C. Co., serving as a troubleshooter. The fish camp was active annually until Ed Biederman's death on March 4, 1945.

## PART II. SOURCES OF INFORMATION

### A. Early Views:

"Biederman's Camp, on left bank of Yukon River about opposite mouth of Charlie [sic] Creek. Eagle district, Yukon region, Alaska. 1926." J. B. Mertie, Jr., photographer, #1263, U. S. Geological Survey, Denver, Colorado.

Bunkhouse and main cabin, Biederman Fish Camp, ca. 1930-1945. Briggs Collection, Eagle Historical Society, Proof sheet H-1.156, neg #33.

Dogs on bank, Biederman Fish Camp, ca. 1930-1945. Briggs Collection, Eagle Historical Society, Proof sheet H-1.143, neg #17.

Drying racks from river, Biederman Fish Camp, ca. 1930-1945.  
Briggs Collection, Eagle Historical Society, Proof sheet  
H-1.156, neg #30.

Fishwheels, Biederman Fish Camp, ca. 1930-1945. Briggs  
Collection, Eagle Historical Society, Proof sheet H-1.156, neg  
#36.

B. Interviews:

Biederman, Charlie. Interviewed by Steve Ulvi and author,  
July 16, 1985. Tape in collection of Yukon-Charley Rivers  
National Preserve.

Hansen, Barney. Interviewed by Terry L. Haynes, Bureau of  
Land Management, July 26, 1976. Tape in collection of  
Yukon-Charley Rivers National Preserve.

Knutson, Art. Interviewed by Leslie Taylor, August 10, 1984.  
Tape in collection of Yukon-Charley Rivers National Preserve.

C. Bibliography:

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1919-24. Collection of Eagle Historical Society.  
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Cooperative Park Studies Unit, University of Alaska,  
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Pyle, Ernie. "A Footless Dog-Team Postman Who's 68 and  
Tough as Nails." Washington Daily News July 16, 1937,  
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Springer, Mark. "At 16, He Hauled Mail on the Yukon."  
Fairbanks Daily News-Miner, February 22, 1984.